

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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DISEASED WATERFOWL IN VIRGINIA'S BACK BAY TO BE DESTROYED

An estimated 8,000 American coots in Virginia's Back Bay are infected with avian cholera, a fatal gastro-intestinal disease potentially hazardous to man, and will be destroyed to prevent further spread of the disease, Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today.

In the last few days, 16,000 waterfowl have died of the disease in the Back Bay area south of Norfolk and just north of the North Carolina line. The Service decided, with the concurrence of the Environmental Protection Agency, that prompt action is needed to protect hundreds of thousands of other waterfowl which have wintered further south and are now beginning their northward migration.

The target birds, American coots, will die in a matter of days from the infection they now carry. The Service will spray the birds from the air with a chemical detergent, Tergitol, which will render them incapable of flight. The birds will then be captured and disposed of in a humane manner, thus eliminating a source of infection potentially dangerous to humans as well as to healthy waterfowl migrating into the area.

This is only the second outbreak of avian cholera on the east coast. The last recorded incident took place in 1970 in the Chesapeake Bay area among sea ducks. More than 110,000 birds died before the infection ran its course.

Interior Assistant Secretary Nathaniel P. Reed said, "We believe a large part of this wildlife resource may be saved by eliminating the infected coots before they can transmit this disease to other susceptible birds."

The coots are isolated on open water. Following their destruction and removal, scaring devices such as propane exploders will be used from boats and rafts for 7-10 days to prevent other birds from using the area.

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Before deciding to use Tergitol, the Fish and Wildlife Service considered a number of alternatives for removing the infected birds. Tergitol was chosen because, according to the best scientific advice available, it will have a minimum, if any, effect on the aquatic environment and because of its quick effectiveness which will minimize bird dispersion. The Fish and Wildlife Service has registered Tergitol with EPA (Registration #6704-73) as an avian stressing agent for the control of roosting blackbirds.

A 25 percent solution of Tergitol will be applied at a rate of 80 gallons per acre. It is estimated that areas treated will total only 10 acres of an 8,000 acre area. Detergent left on the water's surface is not expected to be a problem. Wind, wave action, and disturbance by the boats picking the birds up will break the water's surface tension and disperse the Tergitol.

Intensive monitoring will be undertaken by the Fish and Wildlife Service to determine any effects or hazards arising from this action.

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